

# Reflections: A Complete Guide to *Beneath White Stars*

by Holly Mandelkern

This guide provides questions and reflections for every poem in *Beneath White Stars*. These questions and reflections flow from the individual poems and from the historical backgrounds in the *Lost and Found* at the end of each chapter.

Reflections on the poetry itself tend to follow the other comments. But first, I'd like to share a few thoughts on writing about the individual "stars" in the book.

My focus for the poems was always on the individuals. This was true for the drawings, too. In working with Byron Marshall, the illustrator, my goal was always the same: focus on people and their stories. Byron felt the same way. I regard many of the poems as narrative, telling a story, but one might consider *who* is telling the story. At first I preferred third-person views, sensing that I needed some distance to show respect to the individual subjects, knowing that I could understand only some of what they experienced and felt. Later, though, I wrote some first-person poems when I had a sense of how the person might tell his or her story.

In most cases the language of the poems is rather spare, in keeping with the circumstances of their lives. Some words recur throughout this anthology, and sometimes even within a poem. Common themes also resonate: the end of childhood, the tension between presence and absence, the need to stay alert and responsive to changing circumstances, shifting feelings of despair and boldness, and actions resulting from this boldness.

Historical and literary context are important. Historical backgrounds for each poem give a fuller picture of the lives highlighted in the poems. I use epigraphs, quotations at the beginning (and sometimes the end) of the poem, to provide historical context. Foreign terms and direct quotations from people in the poems add authenticity, and foreign words are defined and cited on the page. Many references to other writers are present, and these literary allusions to other writers matter. As the poet Mary Oliver states, "Poetry is a river; many voices travel in it . . ." Writers and readers of poetry are part of this river.

In addition, I wrote poems in a variety of forms, both fixed and free. There were reasons for my choices, and in some cases I've shared these in these Reflections. But not always. Some of these preferences were intuitive, and the

poem tumbled out as a rough draft in a certain way. If the form felt right, I stayed with it; if not, I changed, revised, and edited until the words were supported by a form—or no form.

Some questions the reader can pose about the poetry are: Why has the poet arranged a poem in one way and not in another? How do line breaks emphasize certain words or create movement, pauses, or stops? Why does a poet choose these specific words and not others? Why are words arranged in a certain order or syntax? What purposes are served by rhyme? Can internal and end rhyme bring things into relationship with each other? How can objects that are skillfully arranged become a poem?

I have paid attention to the sound and music of the poems, including the free verse poems, though in some cases silence needs to be reflected but is hard to describe. I chose details carefully because at times figurative language seemed overdone or just plain wrong, bareness instead lending the necessary chilling effect. But not always. I strove for historical accuracy, a concern that is not applicable to most poetry.

Professor Willard Spiegelman, a scholar of the English Romantic poets, repeats: “Only through art and memory does heroism stay alive.” Can poetry assist memory to keep these stories alive? I hope that the answer is yes.

Numbers next to the poem refer to page numbers in the book for the poem and accompanying illustrations. Historical information is available in *Lost and Found* sections.

## **“Through Leaden Cloud” Page VII**

### **Questions**

- The dedication shows my personal connection to another story from World War II. My father was shot down with his crewmates on a bombing mission over Germany and was kept in a prisoner of war camp with other Allied airmen, both British and American. In January 1945, they were marched out into a freezing cold winter’s night, a march that lasted for months. How does this march resemble the march that Holocaust survivors describe from death camps at this same time?
- What different meanings could “leaden cloud” suggest in this poem?

## **Reflections**

The poem follows the rhyme scheme and line repeats of the French form called the rondeau. The line repeats connect with the theme of imprisonment. The stanza breaks are slightly different than the standard rondeau, though, since I did not wish to break up the initial experience of flight and capture.

## **“Beneath White Stars” VIII-IX**

### **Questions**

- From the darkness of the Warsaw Ghetto, from a camp near Prague called Theresienstadt, and from the Vilna Ghetto in Lithuania, three individuals shared thoughts about stars. What does this wide geographic spread suggest?
- What are your initial impressions of Dr. Korczak, Petr Ginz, and Abraham Sutzkever based on their words that were written or sung from their respective places?
- What are your impressions of them from the stanzas about them?

### **Reflections**

The viewing of stars through the vantage points of Dr. Korczak, Petr Ginz, and Abraham Sutzkever links them together. This device of observing and perceiving is explored by the British Romantic poets, who noticed what people observed and how they formed and finalized impressions. For example, in John Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” notice how men watch the explorer’s eyes and expressions and then look at one another to process the information. How is this attention to perception relevant to understanding the Holocaust—both for the quoted individuals in their time and for us in ours?

# Chapter 1: Departures

## Questions for this chapter:

1. Why didn't all the Jews just leave when they saw warning signs? What kept them there?
2. Where could they go?
3. What efforts were made to help Jews leave, as discussed in this chapter?

## “Heartbeats” 2-3

### Questions

- From this poem, which is based on a photograph (probably taken by Anne Frank’s father), what can you observe about the life of Anne before the war?
- Otto Frank moved his family from Frankfurt, Germany, to Amsterdam in 1933. Why was this measure not sufficient in guaranteeing the safety of his family?
- Why do you think that this poetry collection begins with a poem about someone as well known as Anne Frank?

### Reflections

The phrase “Posed for a shutter” conveys a measure of seeing through a normal lens and staying still for the intended photograph. This luxury of taking time to pose for a photo will quickly end for Anne Frank and for all the others in these poems. Their heartbeats quicken and pound, and ours may, too.

This is a short poem that takes us quickly from the normal to the dark. It's rhymed so that the reader starts with the familiar and accessible.

When my children were growing up, they had pet rabbits for sixteen years. The rabbits seemed never to sleep; they were always alert, always listening to the sounds of their environment. Although the rabbits had different personalities, they were all gentle, sensitive creatures. I was happy to have seen this photo of Anne holding a rabbit and immediately saw the connection of a sensitive, aware girl and a sensitive, alert rabbit.

## **“The Small World of Little Fritz” 4-6**

### **Questions**

- Why did the Westfeld (later Westfield) family feel rooted in Germany?
- How can a child such as Fritz visualize or imagine what his journey to Britain will be? What role did everyday things and toys play in preparing him to think about his present and future circumstances?
- Have you treasured something small but important to you, such as the miniature Torah scroll crafted by Fritz? Could Fritz’s religious traditions and study have offered him some comfort?
- The “covenant between uncharted parts” refers to the covenant (and subsequent sacrifice) between God and Abraham as described in Genesis 15: “And He [God] took him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He added, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” Why is a reference to a covenant and the promised growth of the Jewish population pertinent to this story?

### **Reflections**

I first read of Dr. Westfield’s experience in my Vanderbilt alumni magazine. I did not meet him during my student days at Vanderbilt, but I corresponded with Dr. Westfield while writing these poems. His comments helped me feel that I was accurately reflecting his childhood experience.

Dr. Westfield stressed that the *Kindertransport* was *not* an early attempt at removing children from harm's way; normal life had disappeared for his family as early as 1933. In 1936 his older brother was sent to live with an uncle in Nashville. By 1937 his father could no longer practice law, and this same year, the non-Jewish students in his class gave the Hitler salute. Soon after, Jewish children could no longer attend this school.

I wrote this poem in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter), which stands between high poetry and conversational English, but the lack of rhyme also fits because nothing was regular or predictable in Fritz’s life, especially after the violence of *Kristallnacht*. His Uncle Walter, the prominent art dealer, was arrested two weeks after this fiery night of violence.

*Uncharted* in the last line seemed like the best word to describe Fritz's situation since he—and his parents—knew very little about what would happen to the family.

## **“Watching Myself Watch My Son” 7**

### **Questions**

- Do you think that this journey from Germany to Britain would be harder for the child or for the parent?
- Why do you think that the parents were instructed not to cry when saying good-bye?
- Imagine yourself as a Jewish child in Great Britain writing a letter home to your parents. What would you say? What would you refrain from saying?
- Imagine yourself as a parent responding to a letter from your child in Great Britain. Likewise, what would you write and what would you refrain from writing?

### **Reflections**

The poem captures a mother's simultaneous connection to her child and disconnection from herself and her experience. We see this disconnect in her reference to herself as a mouth, hands, lips, legs, and heart. Have you ever had this feeling of being in the moment and yet observing yourself from a distance? If so, has this happened at a difficult time in your life?

How can the mother's heart feel simultaneously full yet hollow? (I didn't know at the time I wrote this poem that Joni Mitchell, the poet and folksinger, composed a song describing a woman's heart as full and hollow.)

## **“Crosscurrents” 8-10**

### **Questions**

- Why was *Kristallnacht* a trigger event for rescuing Jewish children?
- What do you think motivated the British to act to save the Jewish children?
- Who helped behind the scenes to make this happen both along the route to Great Britain and within Great Britain?

- What safety concerns did the *Kinder* who were settled in homes in cities share with British children?
- Why were there “ten thousand tales how *Kinder* coped”?

### **Reflections**

What do you think was the best way to prepare parents to say good-bye to their children? Norbert Wollheim, quoted in the epigraph, was one who instructed parents to say good-bye without breaking down to help the children stay calm and to present the impression of a planned journey where the children would be cared for on the whole trip. Fritz Westfeld (later Fred Westfield) remembered that his mother did not quite succeed in holding back her tears.

The sense of flowing and moving is easily achieved in free verse, especially with very short lines that correspond to the rapid movement of the children.

## **“I Am That Child” 10-11**

### **Questions**

- What would be totally new for a child learning to live in Britain in these circumstances?
- What would you have packed if you had to leave your home and your family for a new country?
- What could determine if a child felt “at home” in his new surroundings?
- How do you think British children might have felt about having other children come to live in their homes? What distinguishes a family that could successfully accommodate children from a foreign country?
- Is there something in the Quaker religion that made its practitioners particularly open to taking Jewish children into their homes, as well as helping in other ways to facilitate the *Kindertransport*?

### **Reflections**

The sonnet form is used for its precision, turn, and statement made in the rhyming couplet. The English form of the sonnet is used, of course! Traditionally, the sonnet was a vehicle for the expression of love, usually romantic love. This sonnet

addresses and personalizes love of a different variety—familial, humanitarian, and religious.

## **“Transported” 12-13**

### **Questions**

- What experiences did Bambi have in common with these *Kinder*? How soon into watching the film do you think a Jewish child would make that connection?
- After the war, what scenarios can you envision for Jewish children placed in Great Britain—both those whose parents died and those whose parents lived?
- Why might a child feel torn between living with his real parents and his wartime parents?

### **Reflections**

The shape of the poem resembles an hourglass that measures the passage of time. For the *Kinder*, timing was critical in fleeing their native lands at the right moment, the Jewish community not knowing when these transports would be halted.

Enjambment, the continuation of a phrase past the end of a line of verse, makes this quick passage of time even more evident.

## **“A Place for Us?” 14-17**

### **Questions**

- Why were Jews reluctant to leave their homelands of Germany, Austria, and Poland?
- When making plans to leave a country, you must have somewhere to go. Where could Jews go at this time? Where were they welcome?
- Why was Palestine (later called Israel) limited in how many Jews could settle there?
- What explains the inviting atmosphere of Le Chambon, France, as opposed to the response of French policemen in rounding up Jews in Paris in July 1942?



- Why were some people in the Netherlands (and people of other countries) willing to risk hiding Jews?
- What happened when the people of Denmark dedicated themselves collectively to rescuing their Jews?

### **Reflections**

The repeating rhyme in the first line of each stanza (*face, case, place, grace, etc.*) and the end rhymes reinforce the repetition of responses from many countries.

### **“Packing Her Bag” 18-20**

### **“Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag” 21**

### **Questions**

- Starting with the rise of Hitler, many Jews left their hometowns, sometimes forcibly, taking the bare minimum of material possessions with them. “Packing Her Bag” and “Watching Her Daughter Pack Her Bag” show the hurried and uninformed way in which one girl from Frankfurt packs her most important things on October 20, 1941. What can we tell about her life from her choices?
- In addition to the situation described in “Watching My Daughter Pack Her Bag,” what are some other occasions during this period when parents could not protect their children?
- Why didn’t the Jews of Frankfurt know that they were bound for a ghetto in Poland?
- How might the feelings of this mother both differ from and resemble those of the mother in “Watching Myself Watch My Son”?
- What do you glean from the different perspectives of a girl packing her bag and her mother watching her pack?
- Is there a relationship between the words *belong* and *belongings*?

### **Reflections**

Both of these poems about packing are essentially lists. How can a list of things to pack convey emotion?

## Chapter 2: Praying in Pencil

### Questions for this chapter:

1. What function did writing play in ghettos and camps? How did writing serve the community? How does it serve us now?
2. Why do we consider writing a form of spiritual resistance?
3. The work of some of the writers in this chapter has a wide readership. Do we think that these writers, in particular, anticipated the historical importance of their writing? Anne Frank, Nelly Sachs (a Pulitzer Prize winner), Hannah Senesh (especially in Israel), Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, Pavel Friedmann (his butterfly poem is studied in schools), and Petr Ginz (after his drawing *Moon Landscape* was taken on the *Columbia* space mission).
4. Is anything unique in the writings of the women poets?
5. Do you see any common themes expressed by the writers in this chapter?
6. Do you see any common themes or attitudes in the poems about the writers in *Beneath White Stars*?
7. What impressions do you have of the educational background of these writers, by and large?

### “Between the Lines” 38-45

#### Questions

- Why would women choose to write poetry while they were struggling for their lives in ghettos and camps? How did writing help them?
- How do we and historians benefit from their writing?
- Can poetry capture a moment of a woman’s experience and immortalize it? What other “documentation” can do that?
- Gertrude Kolmar is described as a “poet of faces.” In his memoir *And the Sea Is Never Full*, Elie Wiesel says, “For me a city, a country, is first of all a face.” What do these observations have in common?

## **Reflections**

Words are powerful enough to cause both great good and great harm. Is this also true of the words that we use every day?

Rhyming couplets are used because some of these women wrote in couplets and in other traditional styles.

## **“Parallel Limbs” 46-47**

### **Questions**

- Anne Frank and Pavel Friedmann found similar things in nature to comfort them in their respective dark settings. What does this tell us about their abilities to observe and to imagine?
- Do you think that the steadiness and predictability of the tree provided them any measure of reassurance? What might provide comfort to you if you were in trouble or in dire straits?
- We know about Anne from reading her diary, but do we gain any new insight about her from her reference to the horse chestnut tree that she viewed from the Annex?

## **Reflections**

Naturalists, such as the poet Emily Dickinson, knew the calming power of the natural world. In particular, Emily Dickinson, like Anne and Pavel, hailed the beauty of the chestnut tree. In a letter to her advisor and friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she wrote: “I think you would like the chestnut tree I met in my walk. It hit my notice suddenly, and I thought the skies were in blossom.” Does anything from the natural world have a similar effect on you?

## **“You Never Saw Another Butterfly” 48-49**

### **Questions**

- We know very little about Pavel Friedmann as a person. We mainly have an impression of him through his oft-quoted poem about a butterfly. What can we understand about Pavel as implied in this poem?
- How was he able to experience delight amidst all the sadness around him?

- Why do you think Pavel's poem, which is the source text for this one, has taken on so much importance in representing a young person's experience of the Holocaust?

### **Reflections**

The reference “O happy living things” links Pavel Friedmann to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Both the ancient mariner and Pavel respond to nature from bleak environments. (From his troubled circumstances at sea, the mariner responds positively to and blesses water snakes! From Theresienstadt, Pavel yearns to see butterflies.) Pavel’s poem and the story that the ancient mariner relates are told and retold, if you consider that Pavel’s butterfly poem is one of the most cited poems of the Holocaust. It may be worthwhile to think about the effect on the listener when hearing sad tales, such as those told by the ancient mariner and by Pavel Friedman. Does your response to a sad tale depend on its veracity?

### **“Overdue: Book Reports, May–September 1944” 50-52**

### **“Lines in Space” 52-55**

### **Questions**

- What purpose did reading books at Terezin serve for Petr Ginz?
- Why did a library exist in this camp?
- How do you suppose he had become such a self-directed student eager to read across the disciplines (when no one was making him read)?
- Do you see any connection between Petr’s reading, his writing, and his artwork?
- Do you think that Petr’s reading, writing, and artwork provide clues about the vocation that he would have chosen had he lived to maturity?
- Is there an author who means as much to you as Jules Verne did to Petr?
- Why is Petr introduced in “Lines in Space” as “Young da Vinci”? (Petr and Leonardo da Vinci both showed artistic abilities at an early age. Both were mapmakers and were interested in astronomy and aeronautics and were self-taught. They both also depicted the savagery of mankind.)

- What qualities did Petr possess to have become the editor of a weekly publication, including giving assignments to other boys in his living quarters in Terezin?
- “Lines in Space” includes the line “Linocut knives had schooled his heart.” How can daily practices and skills discipline a person as this poem suggests? Is there anything you pursue that works in this fashion?

### **Reflections**

A bibliography as a list of books in “Overdue: Book Reports, May–September 1944” is powerful because of the diversity and depth of Petr’s reading.

Both of these poems about Petr Ginz were based on Petr’s writings and the commentary written by his sister. His “Plans” and “Reports” of his intended and accomplished reading, writing, and drawing are among the most ambitious and diverse lists that I have ever seen, especially for a young person, and provided more than adequate inspiration for poems about this “Young da Vinci.”

I met the illustrator for my book, Byron Marshall, because of Petr Ginz. I gave a talk about Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, and Byron was in the audience. He came up to me after my talk, wanting more information about Petr Ginz. Several weeks later, we met to talk about this remarkable young man, and Byron had done a sketch of Petr. I asked Byron if he would consider illustrating my book, and he said that he would be honored to do so. The illustrations of Petr are some of my favorites in the book, paying tribute to Petr's drawings.

### **“So the World Would Know” 56-57**

#### **Questions**

- One reason that we know so much about what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto is that historian Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum organized many people of all ages and skill levels to collect documents about life and death in the ghetto. How did his training as a historian prepare him for this role?
- What other skills were necessary for him to motivate the many gatherers of information and to coordinate their work?
- What types of documents constituted source material for Oyneg Shabes? Why do you think the members of the organization collected data that

might have easily been cast aside, such as folklore, jokes, and songs? Why do you think that poetry was gathered as documentary evidence?

- What documents suggest resilience and tenacity by the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto?
- Do you think that the collection of data implies that Dr. Ringelblum was pessimistic about the outcome of the Jewish people in the Warsaw Ghetto? (In fact, he had completed a paper about the positive relationship between Poles and Jews and was optimistic about the relationship.)

### **Reflections**

This poem is a villanelle, a nineteen-line poem consisting of a set pattern of repeating the first and third lines of the first stanza and repeating end rhymes for the second line of each stanza. The final couplet consists of the first line and the third line from the first stanza. Each time that these lines are repeated, they should bring something new to the poem.

The interlocking and repetitive structure of the villanelle reflects the harsh restrictions in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the actions of the Oyneg Shabes group expand and intensify as the poem moves down the page.

## **Chapter 3: Standing in Blood**

**Questions for this chapter:**

- 1. Why were there so many forms of resistance? What variables affected the kind of resistance that was possible? How did the place, exact historical circumstances, and location affect what was possible?**
- 2. How did the lack of information about their situations and the lack of weapons hinder their fighting back?**
- 3. How many kinds of resistance did the poet, teacher, rescuer of books, and partisan Abraham Sutzkever engage in while he was in the Vilna Ghetto and nearby forest? (His life after the war as a witness at Nuremberg and as a major advocate for the preservation of the Yiddish language can be interpreted as resisting as well.)**

4. **What are some examples of Jewish children being denied normal childhoods? How do they take on the role of adults in carrying out some responsibilities?**
5. **What picture are you getting of the Warsaw Ghetto where Dr. Korczak tends the orphans, a boy smuggles food to make soup, and Vladka Meed risks her life to serve as a messenger? How do some of the poetic images convey these pictures?**
6. **Can you find examples of how resisting involved making difficult choices? For example, should one flee the ghetto to join the partisans in the forest if one would have to abandon elderly parents?**
7. **Do the people who resisted have anything in common?**
8. **Does luck have anything to do with their survival?**
10. **How many of the survivors in this chapter have been dedicated to sharing their stories and preserving this history?**
11. **What challenges faced those who survived? Please share your understanding of the statement by Norbert Wollheim (“The Standing Prayer” and “No Art”): “We have been saved, but we are not liberated.”**

### **“Bowl of Soup” 72-73**

#### **Questions**

- With a similar mindset to that of Emanuel Ringelblum, photographer Mendel Grossman was dedicated to chronicling life and death in the Łódź Ghetto. Why was this chronicling via photographs important?
- What do this poem and illustration suggest about the importance of family? How could attachment to family be used by the Nazis to undermine Jewish resistance?
- Why were children often the ones to smuggle food into the ghetto?
- Why was it important for this sister to eat this soup, though it was not very nutritious?

## **Reflections**

Again, we see the slipping away of childhood with a brother procuring food for his family.

Simple language and traditional rhyme patterns are used in keeping with the spareness of the theme.

## **“His Overtures of Love” 74-76**

### **Questions**

- With all the restrictions on Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, how could Dr. Korczak nurture the orphans in his care? Besides taking care of their physical needs, what else did he do for them?
- Emily Dickinson tells us (in the epigraph) that God’s presence is nearby and in this world. How do you think she would have viewed Dr. Korczak? How do you view him?
- What kind of sensitivity did Dr. Korczak show in choosing Tagore’s *The Post Office* for the children to perform in July 1942? His intention seemed to be to help the terrified children accept death more serenely.
- Did any of Dr. Korczak’s actions particularly impress you? The phrase “the scale to weigh each child” has particular meaning to me, showing how Dr. Korczak valued and tenderly measured each child as an individual.

## **Reflections**

The structure of the poem leans on Emily Dickinson’s words, which bring the concept of divinity to an understandable level. Her statement of recognizing the divine relates to a saying of the Hasidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev: “Whether a person really loves God can be determined by the love which that person bears toward others.”

## **“Timing Is Everything” 77**

## **“History Lessons” 78-79**

### **Questions**

- Every action mentioned by the courier Vladka Meed required precise timing to execute a specific and dangerous goal for the underground. Although it



seemed that she acted alone, do you think that other people would also be involved in coordinating such actions?

- Why was it easier for a Jewish woman to serve as a messenger for the resistance than a Jewish man?
- What traits, skills, and demeanor would a courier need to succeed? How quickly, for example, would she need to assess if someone were a friend or foe? When I met Vladka Meed in 1991, I thought that she had retained that ability to quickly evaluate and measure people. She sized up our group of teachers very quickly!
- Why do you think that Vladka, in her later years, entrusted teachers with her stories and the stories of other resistance fighters?
- What is the connection between birds and Vladka in “Timing Is Everything”? (The British Romantic poets frequently used birds in a figurative way, as did Robert Frost, an American favorite.)
- Vladka Meed shared hours of testimony about her role in the Warsaw Ghetto as a courier for the underground. She concluded with stories of her grandchildren’s reactions to her role in the resistance. Do the responses of her grandchildren make her seem like a “real” person, not only a hero?
- How important is the transmission of her account, not only to her family, but to you?
- If you have elderly relatives, have they shared their life stories with you? How can these family stories be passed down to others in your family?
- What is the significance of the word *inflamm*e in “History Lessons”?

### **Reflections**

Free verse is used to convey the motion and movement of Vladka, the courier, who moved—and thought—very quickly.

## **“Chanka Garfinkel: Guarding the Memories” 80-83**

## **“Telltale Lines” 84-85**

### **Questions**

- How does Maya Angelou’s life story as reflected in the opening epigraph connect with Helen’s story?
- As a child, Helen had to depend on her instincts to survive. If Helen had improperly assessed a situation, how many events, even the representative ones portrayed here, could have had a different outcome for her and her siblings?
- How much did luck influence her survival?
- How did the kindness of neighbors, a supervisor, and unknown individuals help her survive? What relationships helped sustain her?
- What are some ways that Helen coped with fear?
- Why did Helen spend years in a DP camp after the war?

### **Reflections**

Though some of her family members perished, Helen’s story is unusual in terms of the number of family members who survived.

A recurring idea in this collection is the idea of singing. Here the phrase is “sewing and singing the songs of her mother.” During his testimony, Roman Kent (“Uprooted”) spoke of the importance of singing in his upbringing in Łódź. Abraham Sutzkever (in this chapter) told how important singing was for the Jews in the Vilna Ghetto. Why do you think that music and singing, in particular, recur in the memories of survivors? Do songs from your early years stay with you and still have importance?

We usually think of parades as happy events. In “Telltale Lines” the word is used in a negative way (“malicious men paraded ambition”), as it is in “The Witness Stands” in describing the “painful forced parade” at Auschwitz. In “Transported” the word is used in its more traditional way: “we paraded to flicker of the film *Bambi*.” In a poetry collection there are often words that recur throughout, similar to the way certain themes repeat in a musical composition.

## **“The Standing Prayer” 86-88**

### **“No Art” 88-89**

#### **Questions**

- The prayer that the cobbler was reciting, as indicated by the Hebrew words in the illustration, which translate as “O Lord, open my lips,” is the *Amidah*. This word *Amidah* means “stand” or “standing,” and the prayer is recited while standing. The prayer has fixed benedictions but allows for personal petitions, too. How is it possible that prayer sustained the cobbler (and some others)?
- Some think that praying is a habit and is merely routine. How might this “habit” have sustained some Jews? Does the cobbler’s prayer sound like a rote prayer when he says that he was grateful that he was not created like the murders around him?
- At the memorial that bears his name, Norbert Wollheim states: “We have been saved, but we have not been liberated.” What do you think he means? (For me, his statement suggests that although they were saved, i.e., rescued physically from ultimate extinction, true liberation as manifested in physical strength and psychological/ spiritual freedom would have to come later, if at all.)

#### **Reflections**

In his testimony, Norbert Wollheim attributes his survival to his will to live, his connections with other prisoners in the camp, and luck. Many other survivors report these factors in their survival, too. Survivors are quick to acknowledge, though, that many who died also had a strong will to live and received help from others, but luck often determined who lived and who died. Why is this comment about those who strove but did not survive important?

## **“Patzan” 90-91**

#### **Questions**

- What events put a sudden end to Leibke’s childhood?
- Did he have good choices to make about where he could attempt to survive?

- How did love for his family affect his choices?
- How did he view his work with the partisans? Do you understand his triumphant feelings and pride in the accomplishments of the defenders? This sentiment is expressed in the poem as:  
"Their best refrains were derailed trains—  
dynamite, their fantastic chorus."
- How do you think his love for his family of origin affected his feeling toward his own children?

### **Reflections**

This poem is written in free verse but also uses substantial end rhyme, marrying modern free verse with traditional rhyming. Free verse conveys quick motion and quick thinking, the type that was required by partisans in the forest. End rhyme calls attention to several key words in his experience.

### **“Unter dayne vayse shtern’: A Sonnet for Sutzkever” 92-95**

### **“Sutzkever’s Stars” 96-97**

### **Questions**

- How can anyone write poetry when life is in imminent danger? This same question can be addressed to the women poets, such as the parachutist Hannah Senesh in “Between the Lines.”
- What role did poetry play for Abraham Sutzkever personally and for the young people of the Vilna Ghetto?
- What role did singing play in the ghetto? Sutzkever’s poem “Beneath Your White Stars” so inspired me that I titled my book in part to honor him.
- How important do you think personal relationships were for him in the Vilna Ghetto?
- What do you think made him turn from taking up his pen to taking up weapons?
- Why was it important that Sutzkever and his other “literary” friends decided to bury works of literature? What would have been lost had they not done this?

- After the war when he had settled in Palestine (the land that became Israel), Sutzkever wrote and edited a literary journal in Yiddish while the vast majority of individuals in the new state of Israel were speaking and writing in Hebrew. What explains his dedication to the Yiddish language? Do you have a similar passion about the language that you speak?

### **Reflections**

The sonnet form in “‘Unter dayne vayshe shtern’: A Sonnet for Sutzkever” pays homage to Sutzkever and links him to a long line of poets before him. In “Sutzkever’s Stars” one line pays tribute to William Blake, who states in “The Tyger”: “When the stars threw down their spears / And water’d heaven with their tears.” Although Blake was a very different poet than Sutzkever, the latter was schooled in the work of diverse poets; Edgar Allan Poe was one of his favorites. Including a reference to another poet within a poem is one way of conveying the link between poets. We’re back to the comment by Mary Oliver of poetry as a river. The river now sounds like a chorus!

### ***“L’Chaim” 98-99***

### **Questions**

- Finally, we have a relatively happy poem, at least an acknowledgment of moving forward after the overwhelming experience of loss and suffering by a young person. This poem captures a moment of picking oneself up from places of death and despair. What other poems stay in your mind as a mixture of loss and limited gain?
- Can you offer an explanation of how a match made on the spot could have resulted in an enduring marriage? How pivotal do you think the mutual but not identical experience of surviving the Holocaust was in the success of the relationship of Nesa and Yankel? It was by no means unusual for one survivor to marry another.

### **Reflections**

This poem is written in *terza rima*, which was used by Dante and brings to mind the *Inferno*. The strict rhyme scheme of aba bcb cdc ded efe fgf gg reflects the tension of moving forward in life while remaining tied to the tortured past. This rhyme scheme allows forward movement as it falls down the page, but the

repeating rhymes also suggest standing still. With Nesa and her mother we see a conscious effort to break away from death and move toward life. *L'Chaim!* To life!

## ***"A Glezele Tei" 100-102***

### **Questions**

- What are some ways that we see traces of Tess's childhood in her years as an adult?
- Do you think that there is merit, as exemplified in the life of Tess Wise, in the statement that no one can take your education away from you? How did the education that Tess received at school, at home, and later in medical school shape her dedication to Holocaust education?

### **Reflections**

Tess really did share her educational background with me over a cup of tea at her home. Her literary heritage and distinguished family background are understandably a source of great pride to Tess. Do you have any relatives who have made you feel very proud?

Here we have essentially another list poem. How is emotion conveyed in this list of foreign languages and poets?

## **Chapter 4: Rescue**

### **Questions for this chapter:**

- 1. What characteristics, if any, do the rescuers in this chapter share?**
- 2. Why did rescuers who served as diplomats put their careers, and sometimes their lives, on the line to save Jews?**
- 3. How did rescuers create networks of other good people, sometimes even children, to help them in their work?**
- 4. How does sustained rescue over a period of months or years differ from a one-time rescue?**

5. **How are rescuers honored in poems such as these? Professor Willard Spiegelman, a scholar of the English Romantic poets, suggests: “Only through art and memory does heroism stay alive.” Do you agree with him?**

### **“Mr. Sugihara’s Eyes” 124-127**

#### **Questions**

- A question regarding education for Tess Wise applies also to Chiune Sugihara: How did knowledge of foreign languages open doors for his career and for creating the opportunity to help others?
- Do you think that his university in Harbin was influential in creating or reinforcing his desire to do good in the world?
- How unusual was it for a consul from Japan, a German ally, to help the Jews? Were you surprised that his government forbade him from helping Jews leave Kovno? Do you think he suspected that he was putting his own career at risk by helping the Jews outside his gate?
- What people and variables might have helped him to decide to rescue them?

#### **Reflections**

The repeating rhyme scheme reinforces the idea of the world as a spinning wheel. The end rhyme emphasizes key words in the narrative.

### **“Kissing the Wall” 128-131**

#### **Questions**

- In Belgium, Father Bruno made plans and then customized them for several hundred children of different ages to keep them safe. How risky was this work for him? Why do you think Father Bruno continued rescuing even after his monastery was raided and he was forced to hide and disguise himself?
- How many other people, including children at Catholic institutions, had to cooperate for the rescue effort to succeed?
- In this poem we also get an idea of the challenges that several children faced in dealing with their new environments, including posing as Catholic

children. What are some of the practices that Jewish children would have to abandon so that they would look and act like Catholic children? What Catholic liturgical practices would they have to assume?

- The children in this poem, Jack Goldstein, Rachelle Silberman, and Flora Mendelowicz, were returned to their families. How do you think the gratitude that Flora Singer felt toward Father Bruno (and the nuns who tended her and her sisters) influenced her life?
- Why do you think Father Bruno chose the moment when he was honored as a righteous gentile to recognize other people who had made rescue possible?

### **Reflections**

Again, free verse is used to convey movement, the movement of children and the spinning wheels of Father Bruno, both on his bicycle and in his head. Limited (but not formulaic) end rhyme emphasizes key words in this story. Rhyme, like the outcome of these rescue efforts, is here not regular or predictable.

## **“The Likeness of a Man” 132-133**

### **Questions**

- The poem presents a man of ideals who constantly moves toward a higher calling, a person always aware of serving others. In the lines of a short poem we glimpse the influence and outlook of his grandfather and a hint of his public-spirited orientation as an architecture student. Raoul’s work and travel experiences also broadened his horizon. Yet most other young people who were citizens of the world would not have channeled their experiences into the creative, energetic, and dangerous efforts to rescue Jews. What can we learn about character development and accepting the call to action from the bold example of Raoul Wallenberg?

### **Reflections**

As with the poem for Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, this is a villanelle, a nineteen-line poem consisting of a set pattern of repeating the first and third lines of the first stanza and repeating end rhymes in the second line of each stanza. In the couplet at the end, we sense the strong and idealistic Raoul Wallenberg in constant motion.



The repetitions within the form juxtapose the opposing forces of constraint and freedom in his attempts to rescue the Jews of Budapest.

## **“A Crowd of Hosts” 134-135**

### **Questions**

- What does this epigraph from Psalms suggest about the importance of human actions?
- What example of beneficent actions does the poem provide?
- What complications might ensue with this rescue work as suggested by the illustration?

### **Reflections**

A specific poet comes to mind when we mention a “host of daffodils.” William Wordsworth notes in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” that “a crowd, a host, of golden daffodils” makes his heart dance, even when he looks back and remembers this experience. (Recalling the courage of rescuers creates a similar uplifting feeling for me.) Wordsworth’s writing reflects the power of observation and of memory, and these same themes are germane to commemorative works, such as the poems in my book.

The word *host* has many meanings. The English language is rich and diverse, harvesting words from German, Latin, and French, among other languages. My father-in-law, Dr. Leo Mandelkern, a prominent polymer chemist, would have been disappointed if I did not include this meaning of *host*: a crystal lattice or molecular structure that contains a foreign ion, atom, or molecule. This use of *host* would have been a stretch in this poem!

## **“Risen and Rescued” 136-137**

### **Questions**

- How can culture, even its culinary aspects, disappear when populations are threatened? How can holiday bread (challah) recipes reflect a culture and religious beliefs?
- Some individuals feel they are honoring their family and ethnic traditions when they prepare recipes that their relatives cooked. What connects you with your ancestors?

- The poem mentions recipes from Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Cologne, Germany. Why are so many places mentioned?

### **Reflections**

It was challenging to show how recipes for bread can represent much more than bread. The poem conveys a feeling of lifting and rising in its word choices because bread rises. Do you see any other words that convey a feeling of space? The centering of the poem on the page can also suggest expansion, or at least a different sense of space.

## **Chapter 5: Roundups**

### **Questions for this chapter:**

- 1. What different types of rounding up are depicted here?**
- 2. Why is documenting the Holocaust still taking place? What is the importance of giving witness to these events?**
- 3. What have been some obstacles in bringing war criminals to justice?**

### **“Uprooted” 150-153**

#### **Questions**

- This poem is another story of a boy giving up the joys of youth for the trauma of war. Who and what helped Roman get through the difficult, often deadly, times?
- What are some aspects of life in the Łódź Ghetto that surprised you? (For me it was that the *Judenrat*, the governing Jewish elders, obtained permission from the Nazis to grant plots of land to be used for growing vegetables.)
- How did Roman gain information about his destination, Atlanta? How does this differ from the way that you would learn about a city in a foreign country? This is another example of how reading a specific book informed, encouraged, and inspired a young person at this time. Can you think of

others for whom this is true? (Examples: Peter Ginz and Ben Helfgott in the next poem, “Feathers.”) Has any book had a big impact on your life?

- Knowing a little about Roman from the poem, how do you think that Roman dealt with living in a house with people who did not wish to hear about his past? (He spoke up and complained to the proper agency, and he and his brother were then moved to a more loving home.)

### **Reflections**

I wrote an article for an academic journal about Roman Kent and therefore located a wealth of historical information about him and his life. I had to narrow the focus to write a poem about him, and I chose the various gardens he tended as a way of looking at his life. How does the potato represent the plight of Roman and his brother? The potato is hardy, hidden, and often associated with hunger, and so it seemed an appropriate metaphor.

The language here is lean and simple, also reflecting Roman’s circumstances. This poem is written in free verse that flows in keeping with the movement of the young man and of the way that he tells his own story.

### **“Feathers” 154-155**

#### **Questions**

- The release of feathers is traced in a somewhat chronological fashion: as malicious words that were released by the Nazis and could not be retracted, as actual feathers torn from bedding of Jewish homes on *Kristallnacht* in late 1938, and as Jews were rounded up in ghettos, their bedding shaken to make sure that no people and no valuables were left behind. These conscious, malevolent actions are compared to birds who generally kill only to satisfy their hunger. What does this comparison suggest about the elevated view that we human beings have of ourselves?
- How does gossip have the power to damage other people? You can apologize for spreading gossip, but the words, like feathers, still linger in the air and remain in circulation. What can you do to ensure that you are not damaging others by your words? How can you gauge when a society is consciously spreading this type of verbal venom?

- Ben Helfgott, who shares his story of feathers swirling above him when he returned to the ghetto of Piotrków Trybunalski, describes the influence of the uplifting works of Dr. Janusz Korczak, the doctor of the orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto. Have you read a book that has inspired you?

### **Reflections**

Words, including Nazi propaganda about Jews, have the power to create evil; words, such as the writings of Dr. Korczak, can create good. Judaism has a name for using words to create both evil and good: *lashon hara* (the evil tongue) and *lashon hatov* (the good tongue).

These stanzas are haiku-like in using concise images. However, the true haiku centers on nature, not human behavior. (And the syllable count of 5-7-5 pertains only to the Japanese language.)

## **“The Witness Stands” 156-159**

### **Questions**

- Consider what trees, stationary and often long-standing, could relate if they could talk. Here species from various sites are personified on the stage of history, a terrible history, and tell a distinct chapter of this saga. What would the trees have reported if these witnesses had been able to take the stand and testify against the perpetrators? How many of these crimes have not been reported by people?

### **Reflections**

Trees, the witnesses, watch and are petrified and blinded. They tremble, observe, and hide partisans. They give their lives to derail German trains. A tree offers comfort to Anne Frank. Trees are morally neutral and contribute to our society. Humans, however, choose their paths to do good or evil, or somewhere in between.

In this poem we have haiku-like stanzas. While trees provide the natural setting, the focus of these stanzas is human behavior, while the true haiku centers on nature. This poem does not even attempt to use the haiku syllable count, but it does aim to capture the terseness of the haiku.

## **“Memories in Color” 160-163**

### **Questions**

- What talents could an artist such as Peter Malkin bring to the Mossad, the secret intelligence service of Israel? How was Peter Malkin’s skill as an artist important from both a practical and a historic, documentary sense?
- How difficult would it be to guard a prisoner who bore significant responsibility for the deaths of your family members? This was the situation for many in the Mossad who were part of the capture and extradition plot.

### **Reflections**

How would you begin to tell this story, or threads of this story, as a poem? I chose to use color and other tools of this artist and Mossad agent. I thought that the use of artistic terms painted Peter Malkin as a multidimensional person, just as Peter had used art to portray Eichmann both as a person and as a murderer. But vivid colors are reserved for Peter, his work, and his family in my poem, and he was such a colorful individual.

## **“Misericordia for the Last Jews of Busk, Ukraine” 164-166**

### **Questions**

- How quickly did a leafy-green, bucolic town turn into a killing field when the *Einsatzgruppen* entered?
- How many layers of evil are present here?
- Why is it important to uncover the truth about these murders?
- Is healing possible after these events?
- What price did the child witnesses to these murders pay in keeping silent for all these years about what they experienced so long ago?
- How has Father Patrick Desbois expanded the concept of truth and healing, or healing-in-truth for the eyewitnesses?
- How does he build bridges between Catholics and Jews with his work and dedication?

## **Reflections**

“One kid, only one kid” and “just one goat, only one goat” allude to Jewish tradition, specifically to a song that is a vital but mysterious inclusion in the Passover Seder. The song, “Chad Gadya,” speaks of animals beaten and devoured, and while it is enjoyed by children, it is no child’s ditty. There are many interpretations, including that the song, the story, is not complete until God enters the picture. A rabbinic sage from Vilna, Lithuania, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), also has rendered a popular interpretation. He viewed each stage in the song as an expression of the struggle between Jacob and Esau for the blessings of their father, Isaac. Here we go, back to Vilna, the Jerusalem of Europe!

## **Chapter 6: Close Connections**

### **Questions for this chapter:**

- 1. Why did parents in the Warsaw Ghetto find it hard to explain to their children what was happening at the time and why does it continue to be difficult to share with children even now?**
- 2. What did people in the poems have in common and how might their paths have crossed?**

### **“Recounting” 184-185**

#### **Questions**

- In this poem we see further examples of children, even as young as age six, losing their childhood and parents trying, often in vain, to protect and nurture their children. Why did children, even young children, often take on adult responsibilities in the ghetto? Why couldn't parents consistently protect and nurture their children?
- Why was it so hard for parents in the Warsaw Ghetto to explain to their children what was happening? Why is it still difficult to explain this history to our children now?

## **Reflections**

As a Jewish parent, I found it very hard to bring up the Holocaust with my own children after ensuring that they had a wonderful feeling about their Jewish faith. I dread the time when we must relate this history to our young grandsons. We fervently hope that this history is assigned to the past.

The poem includes themes and words that have previously appeared in this collection, including *guard* and *gauge*. They were used at the beginning in “Heartbeats” and now at the end.

The language of the poem is simple, but the sentiment is not.

## **“Close Connections” 186-189**

### **Questions**

- Which of the pairing of names in this poem surprised you? For me, I was surprised that the talented writers Anne Frank, Pavel Friedmann, and Petr Ginz were at Auschwitz at almost the same moment.

### **Reflections**

This list of people’s names differs from most other lists in this book. Many of the other lists have negative connotations: lists of things to take on a train to an unknown destination, lists for roll calls at death camps, lists of those to be transported, and lists of things banned. This list is a gathering of names of individuals you have read about and have come to know in some small way. It is an intimate list, like engraved names on a charm bracelet, names stitched into a quilt, names of family members written on a photo, the generations listed in Genesis. I used rhyme to help the listener remember the words, or names, as was done in the past. And remembering their names and their stories is a primary reason for my writing *Beneath White Stars*.

## **Afterword**

### **“Taking Sides” 193**

#### **Reflection and a Final Question**

The idea for this poem came to me when I was hearing an opera singer who sang her story but also used dramatic facial expressions, gestures, and movements to enhance her words. Elie Wiesel employed none of these techniques; instead, he

relied solely on the power, pacing, and inflection of his words. Elie Wiesel had experience with music and its cadences as a former choir director and composer of a cantata, but generally his words alone carried his message to the listeners.

How do you convey your most important stories to others?